The influence of the National Reading Tests on teaching and learning of reading strategies

A Welsh secondary school case study
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Wales National Reading Test – the journey

- 2006 – national testing (SATs) abolished
- 2011 – Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) introduced
- 2013 – annual tests for all 7-14 year olds (4 reading tests, each targeting a pair of year groups).

Separate Welsh and English reading tests (i.e. not translations) and optional diagnostic tool available

- 2018 – start of rolling programme of online tests

Initial research questions

To what extent have the National Reading Tests influenced:

- how teachers present and teach reading skills and strategies?

- the pupils' experiences and understanding of reading skills and strategies?

- classroom practice at Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14)?

Case study – School Y

- 11-18 co-educational community secondary school

- approximately 1000 pupils on role

- full span of academic ability

- approx half of pupils from homes where at least one parent speaks Welsh and most pupils can speak Welsh at first language level

- Welsh is the main language of instruction

- in 2015 (year of data collection) School Y was in yellow category (in need of improvement in some areas) according to Welsh Government

Literature review

- pupils' attitudes to reading
- use of reading strategies
- using reading strategies to promote self-efficacy*
- impact of standardised testing on classroom practice
- use of standardised tests to assess reading

- self efficacy = Can I do this?

Conclusions

The inter-relationship between reading, **self-efficacy** and the use of reading strategies is crucial. **Reading for pleasure** is a key factor in reading attainment. At the same time, **assessment for accountability** and the use of standardised tests have a very strong influence on classroom practice.

Sample and data collection methods

Table 1: Sample details

	Boys	Girls	Total
11 years old	61	72	133
14 years old	69	100	169

n = 302

- **pupil questionnaire** – delivered online in IT room
- **four pupil focus groups** (mix of ability and chosen by Literacy Co-ordinator)
- **interviews** with key staff, i.e. Literacy Coordinator and Support Team leader
- **review of policy** documents from School Y.

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Reading preferences

Table 2: By age

	11 years	%	14 years	%
Factual books	49	37	42	25
Fiction	79	59	84	50
Magazines	46	35	53	31
On-line material	17	13	36	21
No interest in reading	7	5	31	18
Other reading	32	24	12	7

Table 3: By gender

	Boys	%	Girls	%
Factual books	47	36	44	26
Fiction	50	38	113	66
Magazines	43	33	56	33
On-line material	23	18	30	17
No interest in reading	19	15	19	11
Other reading	25	19	19	11

n = 302

Age: Most striking difference in the percentages for '**No interest in reading',** almost **four times higher amongst older pupils**, 18% of 14 year olds compared with only 5% for 11 year olds.

Gender: Attitudes to **fiction**, almost twice as many **girls (66%)** reported enjoying those type of books than **boys (38%).**
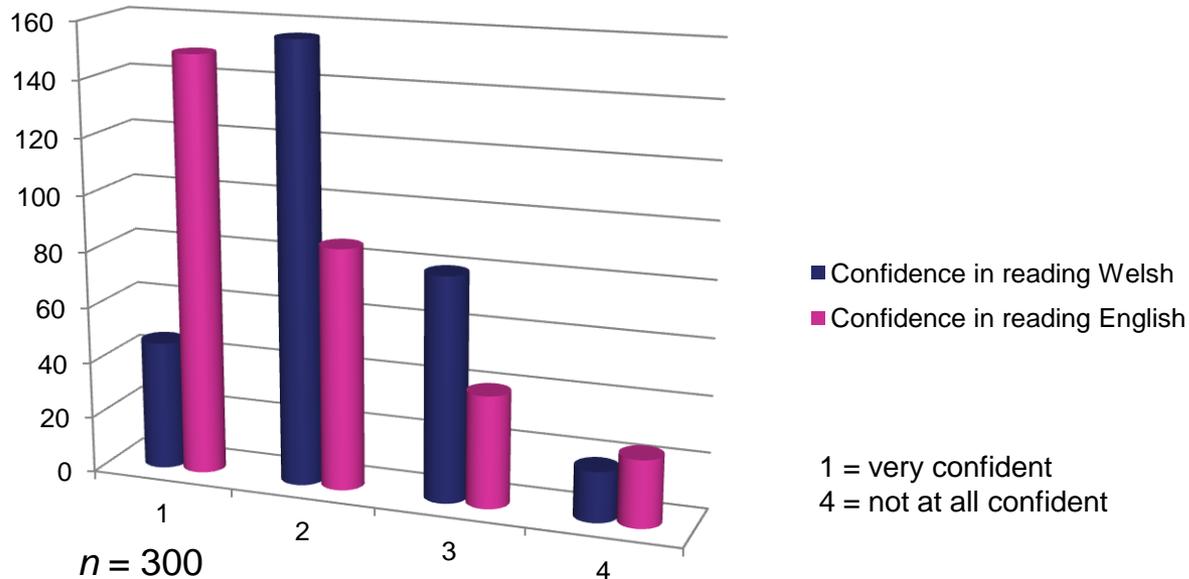
These attitudes are in line with the literature over a long period: Whitehead, *et al.* (1977), (McKenna, et al., 1995) and Clark & Foster (2005).

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Figure 4: confidence in Welsh and English reading

- Confidence in reading Welsh
- Confidence in reading English

1 = very confident
4 = not at all confident

n = 300

I love reading… but, for every five English books I only read about two Welsh ones. (Yr 9 girl)

Interest and confidence in reading

- Just over half of girls (51%) felt more confident in reading since being in secondary school compared with less than a third of boys (32%).

- Just over a quarter of the Year 9 (age 14) sample (28%) had more interest in reading in primary school. In Year 7, only 17% felt that way. Well over half the sample (58%) said that their interest had increased or stayed the same.

Reading in Welsh lessons– pupil perspective

Table 5: Frequency of reading activities in Welsh lessons

	Silent reading	Paired reading	Teacher reading	Class novel	Reading aloud
every lesson	14	7	67	49	17
often	82	69	150	136	94
sometimes	112	125	65	85	115
infrequently	56	61	13	23	53
never	38	40	7	9	23

n = 302

I don't think about the text [when reading aloud to others]. I just concentrate on saying the words right. I have to go over the passage again in my head to understand everything. (Yr 7 boy)

I don't like reading in a group or to the class, because I can read o.k. in my head but when I have to read out loud I don't enjoy it. (Yr 9 boy)

The key staff members emphasised a departmental focus on paired reading to reduce pressure on pupils to read aloud to the class and that teachers did not often read aloud as pupils needed the practice.
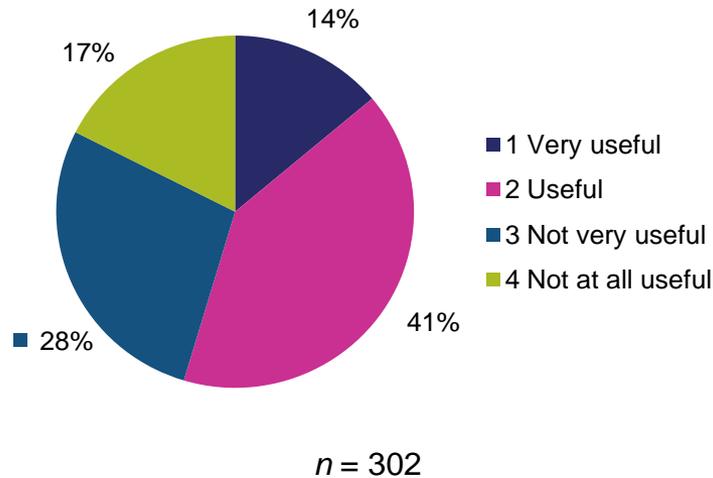
Reading strategies – the department view

- **concerted effort to teach reading strategies** as a way to improve literacy levels - in line with Hattie's meta-analysis (2009) and other studies e.g. (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) a (Souvignier & Mokhlesgerami, 2006)

- **8 reading behaviours** promoted at government and local authority level - aims to provide learners with tools to support their engagement with a text
(http://learning.gov.wales/resources/learningpacks/mep/literacy/creating-best-practice/developing-reading/?lang=en)

- School Y Literacy Co-ordinator reported that the 8 behaviours had prominence, including a booklet and training for staff.

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Literacy sessions

Figure 5: Response to literacy sessions

Figure 6: Response by age

14%

17%

■ 1 Very useful
■ 2 Useful
■ 3 Not very useful
■ 4 Not at all useful

■ 28%

41%

n = 302

Over half the sample (55%) were positive but more than a quarter (28%) felt the sessions weren't very useful and a further 17% considered them of no use at all.

Literacy sessions

■ Year 7
■ Year 9

Very useful | Useful | not very useful | not at all useful
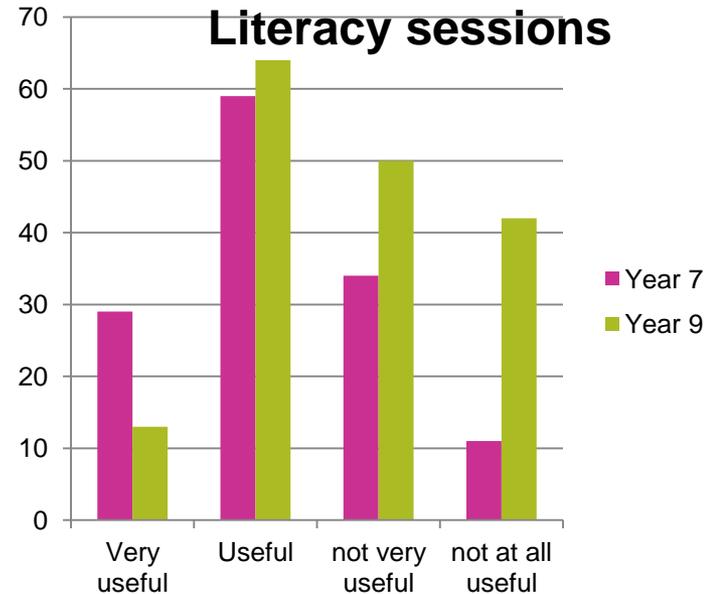
Yr 7 (*n* =133) were more positive, with two thirds praising the sessions compared with less than half (46%) of the older pupils (*n* =169).

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Teaching to the test

Teachers under pressure to reach goals expressed in terms of increase in test scores tend to focus their teaching on what is required in the tests, spend time on practice tests and, often unconsciously, value test performance rather than genuine learning. (Harlen (2003) p44)

Hattie (2009) found such activities not to be effective in improving achievement as do other studies (Torrance, 2011; Grinell and Rabin, 2013).

Hattie (2012) advocates timely and 'where to next' feedback.

Effect of tests on pupil confidence

- Majority of pupils (69%) reported feeling confident compared with their perception of how they had felt the previous year (56%), indicating that the school's preparations had been useful.

- Staff interviewed felt that the tests were demotivating for low ability pupils.

- Some pupils also reported feeling nervous and unsure during testing periods.

Pupil test worries

- *I read a word and then I think 'Oh no!'* (Yr 7 boy)

- *It's more stressful [in a test situation] and we don't concentrate on how to improve, just on how to answer these questions.'* (Year 9 boy)

   Such findings were also reflected in the literature (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Harlen, 2003).

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Table 7: What happened after the test?

	%
received my test score	50
went over the paper	43
discussed my score with my teacher	19
discussed my score with my parents	45
discussed my score with my friends	37
discussed how to improve my reading skills	29
none of the above	7
don't remember	26
other	2

n = 291   Note: There was quite a lot of confusion in focus groups between national and school-level tests so the above data is not wholly reliable.

Restricted

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Use of data from national tests in School Y (June 2015)

- tests seen as 'external', with no ownership by staff

- all tests marked by support staff with assistance from member of SMT, subject teachers not involved at all

- test papers stored in Welsh dept, but pupils didn't receive raw scores or see their papers

- reporting of reading ages to parents at start of autumn term

- no use of the Welsh Government diagnostic tool to analyse data

- internal spreadsheet devised to record scores in every strand of the tests but very little use made of that data by departments

Summary of case study findings

- introduction of the National Reading Tests has had an effect on the development of reading skills in School Y

- strong emphasis on teaching specific reading strategies

- pupils displayed self-efficacy and considerable confidence about approaching reading texts

- mixed pupil reaction to the literacy sessions and practice booklets in the style of the National Tests

- national test data used solely for accountability purposes in School Y and formative use underdeveloped

- pupil confusion about internal and national testing

- lack of staff ownership of national tests

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Recommendations for School Y

Pupil attitudes
- use the Support Team in a wider role to promote reading
- create a reading climate – especially in Welsh, develop the library space and make time for reading for pleasure

Promoting literacy
- continue to develop self-efficacy
- move away from 'test practice' and develop more general reading strategies – review and vary the content of the literacy sessions
- review effectiveness of the whole-school promotion of the 8 reading behaviours

Use of national data
- encourage formative use of test data – use of online tool
- allow pupils and staff to see and discuss the completed tests
- consider input from teachers in marking process – e.g. marking a sample

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How typical is school Y?

Additional research carried out in October 2017

- email to 46 Welsh departments in Welsh medium schools

- short online questionnaire on use of test data

- 15 responses received

- data analysed in order to compare with School Y.

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Teaching to the test?

How relevant are the following to improving pupils' reading skills for the National Tests? Scale: 1 = very relevant, 5 = not relevant at all

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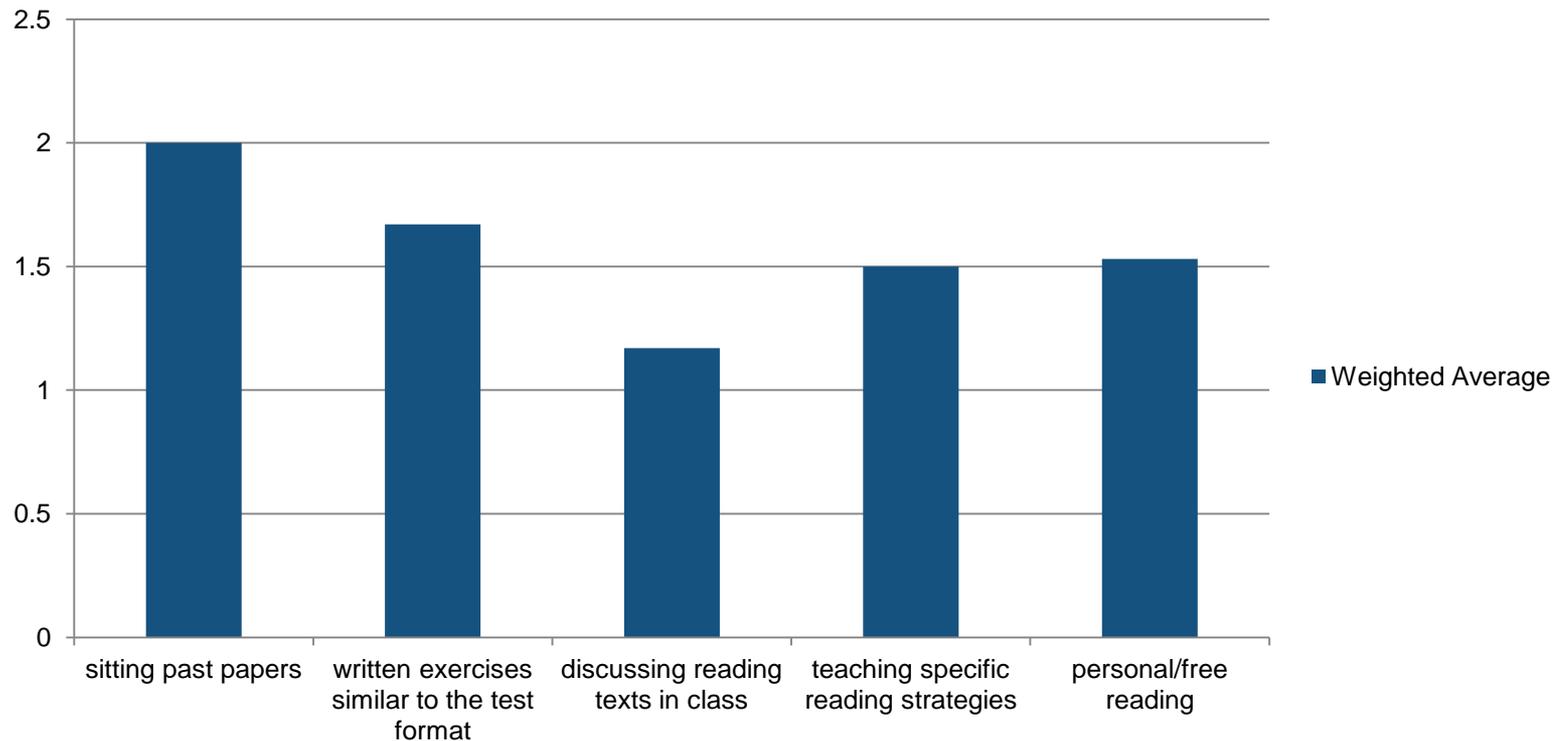
Awareness of test content and use of diagnostic tool

Who marks the tests?

- teachers   7
- support staff   5
- both   2
- other   1

n = 15

60% of teachers were able to look at marked papers for pupils they taught, but just over a quarter were not.
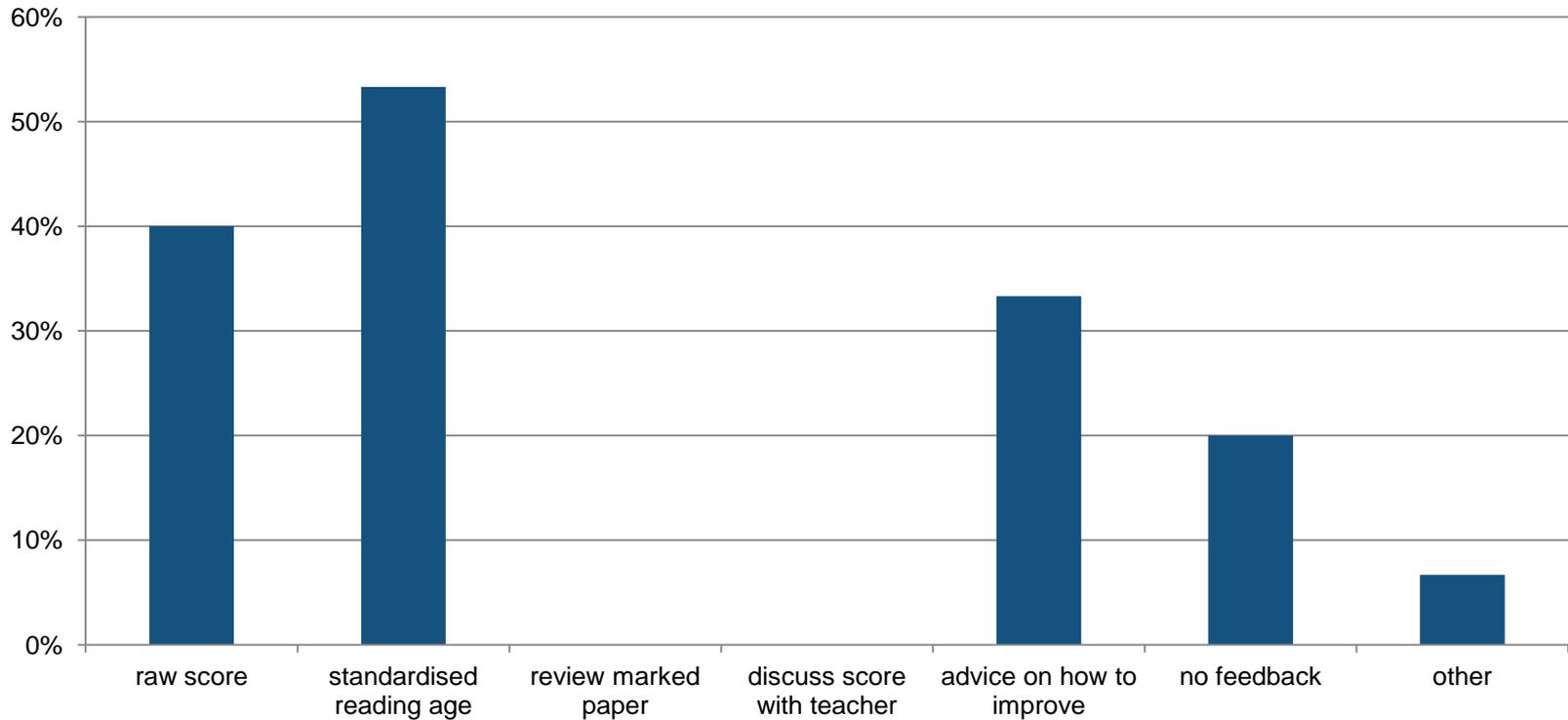
Just over half of the schools surveyed (n=8) used the government diagnostic tool, a third used another type of tool, but two schools used no diagnostic tool at all.

Use of data

What use is made of data from the national tests in your school?

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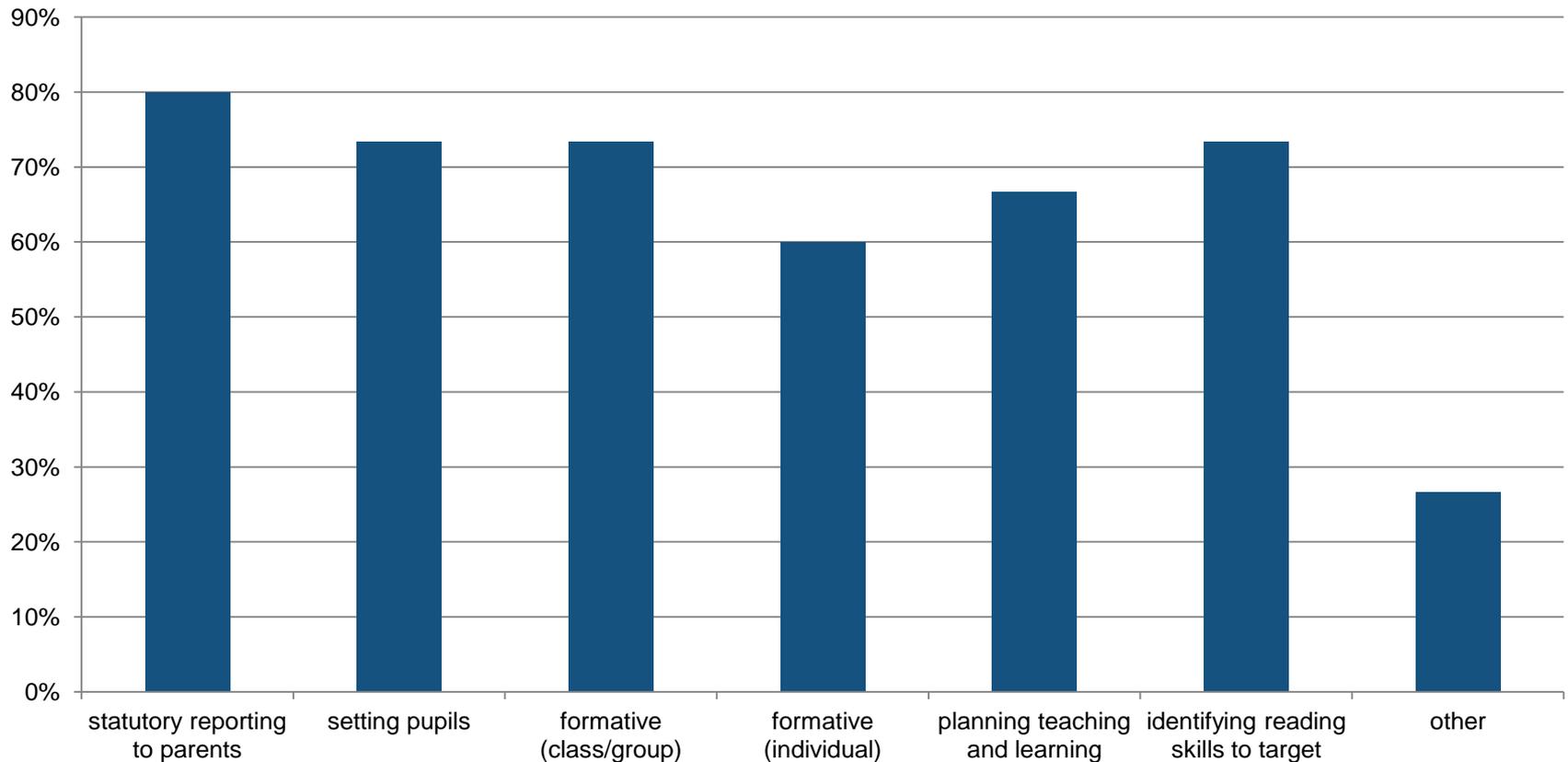
Feedback to pupils

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What feedback does an individual pupil receive on test performance?

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